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Two days ago, I was in Alaska. Yesterday, Michigan. And tonight, Virginia.

There is nothing like such a journey to make you appreciate two things:

First, sleep. With all my remaining strength, let me endorse the words of Sancho Panza in "Don Quixote," who said: "Blessings on the man who first invented sleep."

Second, you cannot span this country without being struck by what a bountiful nation it is.

We have tremendous resources. But we have problems with those resources.

I am here to talk to you about both the good and the bad.

It is a new time in Washington.

Tonight you are one hundred miles from there. Possibly that is as close as some of you care to get. But from here or wherever you live and work you must have sensed that President Carter has put a new focus on conservation and the environment.

He brings the viewpoint of a farmer and environmentalist to the White House. In his environmental message to Congress on May 23 he laid out the issues clearly, saying:

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Address by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research and Education, before the Soil Conservation Society of America, August 7, 1977, at Richmond, Virginia

"Americans long thought that nature could take care of itself -- or that, if it did not, the consequences were somebody else's problem. As we know now, that assumption was wrong. None of us is a stranger to environmental problems.

"My administration is committed to a policy of effective stewardship of our public lands and natural resources. That policy includes conservation, multiple use of resources, and a reluctance to disrupt natural ecosystems. At a time when it has become apparent that we can no longer afford the waste and misuses of any natural resources, the need for these steps is clear."

So, in line with the theme of this convention, new directions have been set.

Bob Bergland strongly supports those new directions. The Department of Agriculture will be in the forefront of the move to turn this new leadership into action and programs.

One of the areas where action and leadership -- including yours -- are most needed is in land use.

The Society's stated purpose is to "advance the science and art of good land use."

Never before has "good land use" been so sorely needed. But never before has it also been so widely debated or so difficult to define.

Everyone supports it in principle, but working out specifics often brings stalemate and frustrated inaction.

We cannot let controversy and frustration stop us.

For today, we are witnessing a race for space. Not in the skies above us, but on the land under our feet. Too few people are aware of that race -- and even fewer, I fear, are aware of the stakes involved.

Both people and the land will suffer if we continue what we are doing now.

We cannot say we have not been forewarned.

Listen to the words of Chief Seattle -- spoken in 1854 -- as he responded to a request that his tribe sell its land to the U.S. government:

"We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. . . .He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert."

In his "Sand County Almanac," Aldo Leopold used different words to give the same warning:

"We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steamshovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use."

The record is full of such warnings. In the past 40 years many of the most eloquent pleas for good land use have come from this society.

They have not been without their effect. This nation has some of the finest resource management programs in the world. We have developed and managed soil and water to produce vast quantities of high-quality food, fiber and timber products at a relatively low cost.

But our successes were yesterday. People forget quickly. They look to the exploding demands that face us and ask what we will do to meet these new challenges.

The nation is concerned, and rightly so.

The arithmetic is bad. Every trend goes the wrong way.

On one hand, we see more people. Growth in America may require 50,000 new housing units a week from now until the year 2000. That means not only housing, but food, roads, industries, airports, sewers, power plants.

On the other hand, five million acres of rural land are taken out of production for other use each year. As a productive resource, it is gone.

Bob Bergland calls these two opposing trends a "collision course with disaster."

He is right.

Too much energy has already gone into the debate over when and how the "collision" will occur. We have to use that energy to turn those trends around. Or at least to stop them before the crash becomes inevitable.

Obviously, we must improve both our land use and conservation programs. There are no easy answers on how to do it. But I see three steps:

First, we must educate people on the enormity of the problem and the consequences of continuing a policy of no-policy. They must be convinced that using land solely on a short-term economic basis is folly. They must be made to realize that this basic finite resource cannot be used mindlessly for greed and convenience. We must have a national land use policy, and it must be based on something besides economic anarchy.

Second, we need to know more about the nation's land and water resources.

We are getting some new tools to do this.

The Resources Planning Act has given the Forest Service the opportunity to survey the forest and rangeland resources of the nation. Legislation giving a similar mandate to the Soil Conservation Service has passed both houses of Congress and needs only conference committee agreement.

Meantime, we are going ahead as rapidly as possible with resource surveys under existing legislation and programs.

A national erosion and sediment survey is under way. By next spring we hope to know a lot more about such things as the condition of the nation's lands, the direction of land use trends, the severity and extent of soil erosion problems, and the type and amount of conservation needs.

Later we will look at sedimentation and water quality in an attempt to determine the connection between water quality problems and use and treatment of land.

We need this information to move to meet the nation's water quality goals. We also need more research on water itself. It is the No. 1 limiting factor for agricultural production.

The third step we should take to improve land use and conservation programs is to change them where needed. We are doing that.

A high-priority program at USDA is one designed to protect the nation's prime farmlands from conversion to other uses. We have another new program to do the same thing for prime timberlands.

We are deeply committed to both these programs. If we cannot slow down the conversion of prime farm and forest lands to nonproductive uses, we will eventually pay a heavy price.

You already can see some of the price.

The recent pressure for all-out production has caused millions of acres of marginal farmland to be used. Marginal farmland requires the use of finite resources that are dwindling -- fertilizer, water, natural gas, chemicals, oil, electric energy.

It also invites more ravaging of topsoil by erosion. Last year, the Soil Conservation Service estimates wind erosion severely damaged more than seven million Great Plains acres. For many regions it was the second and third successive years of such damage.

SCS also estimated that the average soil loss on U.S. cropland is about nine tons per acre per year -- nearly twice what can be lost without permanent soil depletion.

That cannot go on.

To help make certain that it does not, we are reviewing all of the USDA soil and water conservation activities.

These programs have been severely criticized recently. We don't agree with all our critics, but we find ample reason to be concerned.

Some of the criticisms merely repeat things soil and water conservation professionals like yourselves have been saying for years:

- * Too little money is used for long-term, enduring conservation practices.

- * Too many production and income stabilization programs work against good conservation instead of for it.

- * There is too much red tape and paperwork.

Those criticisms do not shock us. Actually, we welcome them as an opportunity to improve these programs. I assure you we will use the opportunity.

Water resource programs also will undergo changes. We have recently reviewed 700 small watershed projects, using new criteria for economic efficiency, environmental impact, and safety. That report awaits final review and action within the Administration.

But you should be aware that we have entered a new era on water projects.

Now we look for nonstructural solutions to watershed problems. We look to land treatment, flood plain management, and storm water management as ways of providing needed flood protection and watershed stability.

We no longer think in terms of how many dams and channels we can build. Instead we think in terms of how few.

One of the areas on which President Carter has spoken out strongly is wetlands. USDA plans to move just as strongly to contribute to the proper protection and management of these vital resources.

I have established a wetlands task force in the land use committee. Its job is to recommend new directions and activities for the department. We are seeking the ideas of other federal agencies, and conservation, environmental and agricultural organizations. We want to open up USDA's policy-making process. We want to get public input in the early stages of program development.

The President also called for a review of cooperative forestry programs in his environmental message, with a focus on the non-industrial private forest lands.

These are the 300 million acres that make up three-fifths of the nation's productive timberland base. If SCSA is to achieve its objectives on land and water use, our forests and related resources must be well protected, well-managed, and effectively used.

A draft of the forestry review has reached my desk. We expect to have some new initiatives in this area soon.

We are taking these new directions with one eye trained on another change President Carter wants to make in our federal system -- the reorganization of the government.

We have been studying proposals for a comprehensive review of all the federal functions on natural resources, energy, and the environment.

It is too early to tell what recommendations will go to the President. But it is not too early for you to speak your minds on the matter. Your society can speak out with a professional viewpoint, and I urge you to do so. Don't wait until the studies are done and the recommendations made.

It is, as I said earlier, a different time in Washington.

Probably nowhere is it more different than in USDA.

The Department of Agriculture has been known, since its creation in Abraham Lincoln's time, as "the people's" department. But, we intend to make it "all the people's" department.

Bob Bergland has made clear from the beginning last January that things are going to be different. USDA will no longer be, as he has said, the "captive fiefdom of some special interest group."

That does not mean that groups that had easy access before are going to be shut out. It means that other people will be coming in.

People everywhere are demanding the right to be involved, to be consulted, to have their thoughts incorporated in government policies and actions.

We intend to listen to them.

It is not going to make the decision process any easier. Instead it will make it tougher. But it also will make it more realistic.

If ever there were a time for realism, it is now.

People's knowledge, aspirations and expectations are higher than ever in man's history. At the same time, the resource base for filling man's needs has never been more strained.

Our non-renewable resources shrink daily, at increasingly rapid rates. Renewable resources are threatened as damage mounts to the basic land and water environment that produces them.

In the past, federal-state research and extension work has increased the per-acre yield of farm and forestry products and allowed us to do the needed production job on fewer acres.

But research and extension cannot continue to do this job without additional support. During the past decade, public support for agricultural research has not kept up with its increasing costs.

The same is true for extension work.

As a result of this and other factors, the rate of yield increase in a number of major crops has leveled off. The rate of overall productivity increase in the farming sector also has slowed.

If we are to have future productivity increases, we need a strong basic research program. We will ask for a budget increase for agricultural research and extension.

Congress already is providing increased funds for mission-oriented basic research grants in the fiscal 1978 budget. Most of these funds are for crop production research, the remainder for human nutrition research.

Some research produces quick results. But most of it -- the type we need to help with our problems -- takes more time to produce its payoff.

Meanwhile, we must learn to live within our limits, to cope with scarcity, to share access to resources. It will not be easy. It will call for the very best in both governmental management and professional skills.

We will need your help.

You know what needs to be done. You have an opportunity and a responsibility to reach out to the people who need to know, but don't. To the public officials who make land use decisions, but lack facts that are second nature to you.

For the bountiful land that you see from an airplane is not always that when you get on the ground. There you see the problems and what needs to be done.

It is not unlike the situation portrayed in a tale about the great showman, P. T. Barnum.

He used to keep in his circus a cage that had in it a lion, a tiger, a wolf, a bear and a lamb. He called them "The Happy Animal Family."

One day a visitor came to the circus and marveled at the sight.

"Remarkable," the visitor said. "How long have they been living together like that?"

"Eight months," Barnum replied. "Of course, we have to put in a new lamb now and then."

Ladies and gentlemen, we must stop sacrificing the lambs in our family of resources.

Thank you.

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Advance for Release at 6:30 P.M. EDT, Sunday, Aug. 7, 1977

